1: Ammar E, I-5 (1951) 1954
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Silwa

Preface

THE VILLAGE SETTING

SILWA, the village community chosen for this study, is an Egyptian village in the province of Aswan, the southern border province in Upper Egypt.[1] It lies at a distance of about 850 kilometres from Cairo and approximately 80 kilometres to the north of the town of Aswan itself. With a population of nearly 3,500, Silwa is an administrative headquarters with a Police Centre responsible for ten villages, five of which, including Silwa itself, are officially referred to as Northern Silwa (Silwa Bahari), while the other five are called Southern Silwa (Silwa Kibli).

The total area of this administrative unit covers more than 17 square kilometres along the eastern bank of the Nile, with a total population of more than 11,000. The density of population in these villages is about 700 persons per square kilometre, whereas it is slightly less than 600 for the whole country.[2] The sex distribution in the village of Northern Silwa, according to the official statistics of 1947, shows almost even number of males and females, a distribution which is similar to that in the whole country. The table overleaf shows the relation between age distribution in Silwa Bahari and that of the whole country.

Significant in the table is the fact that the figures in Silwa follow pretty closely the national figures, and that slightly less than 40 per cent of the total population both in Silwa and in the country as a whole are less than 14 years old, a population trend characteristic of peasant societies.[3] It cannot be ascertained how the malaria epidemic which spread in Silwa and in all parts of the province of Aswan between 1942 and 1945 has affected the percentages of age distribution in Silwa and might partly account for the slight discrepancies shown in the table.

[1] At present Egypt is divided into sixteen administrative provinces.

[2] *Census of Population of the Kingdom of Egypt for 1947*, Vol. I, pamphlet 1—The Province of Aswan, Govt. Press, 1951 (Arabic). The General Census for the whole country from 1947 had not been published during the writer's stay in Egypt (1951) and he had to work out figures for the whole country from the previous General Census of 1937, taking into account the increase of population from 17,000,000 in 1937 to 19,000,000 in 1947.

[3] Oscar Lewis, *Life in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlan Restudied*, University of Illinois Press, 1951, p. 30.

1: Ammar E, I-5 (1951) 1954
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512 almost deserted, except for women going on visits or on business and young children noisily engaged in their games. By sunset the roads leading to the village become busy and crowded with villagers and cattle returning home, who in their hurried endeavour to get their evening meal raise the dense cloud of dust that characterizes the agricultural roads and the village streets during this hour. Some time later, the village witnesses the general exodus of women and girls from the village towards the Nile to fill their water jars, while the men sprawl outside the houses or cluster round a wood-fire in the guest house on cold nights to exchange news, smoke their tobacco and engage in gossip.

369 121 101 In portraying some of the features of the rustic setting and life in Silwa, a question emerges: to what extent is this village under study typical of the rural conditions in Egypt? To such a question an objective answer is almost impossible, considering the fact that there are five thousand large villages and twenty thousand hamlets (izbahs) in Egypt. The writer can only claim with confidence that Silwa is typical of the majority of villages in the province of Aswan. There are certainly differences from one province to another, with regard to the degree of urbanization, the infiltration of agencies of social change such as schools, means of communication, newspapers and radio. On the whole, Aswan, being the farthest province from the metropolis, could be considered relatively the least affected by such factors. It is also known as one of the poorest provinces, as the Nile Valley reaches its narrowest stretch in the south (with the exception of the district of Kom Ombo). Moreover, Silwa, as will be seen later, is composed mainly of small landowners. There are many other villages throughout Egypt where the inhabitants are mainly tenants or part-owners and part-tenants, while many others work as hired labour.[1] With the exception of Kom Ombo, the majority of the land in Aswan produces subsistence crops, while in other provinces cash crops such as cotton and sugar-cane may be the main agricultural crop.

562 189 At this juncture it is important to point out one of the striking differences between most of the provinces of Upper Egypt down to Beni Suef and the other provinces, especially in the Delta. This is while women in the former provinces go about veiled and do not actually work on the fields, those in the latter are neither veiled nor debarred from active work on the farm. The writer cannot satisfactorily account for such a difference and knows of no source that has tackled this question. Is it merely a result of some historical or racial difference between the two parts of the country? Has it some connection with cotton culture and the perennial irrigation which are mainly predominant in the North?[2] Is it an expression of some

[1] See A. Ammar, op. cit.

[2] The cultivation of cotton requires not only a dense population, but one with a birth rate above the average. Charles Issawi, *Egypt—An Economic and Social Analysis*, London, 1947. In the light of this, female labour was perhaps essential for the economic activities in those provinces.

1: Ammar E, 1-5 (1951) 1954
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community marked with the lowest degree of isolation and homogeneity was characterized by the highest degree of individualization, secularization, and disorganization, and conversely.[1]

This hypothesis of the historical phases of culture change has stimulated other anthropologists to test it. Sol Tax, examining the hypothesis in the light of his Guatemalan data, was led to make a distinction between two aspects of culture that would cut across Redfield's framework. With regard to the world view and the beliefs about nature and man, the Guatemalan Indians are of the primitive type, while in their kind of social relations they are of the civilized type. He maintains that the interrelationships of the folk-life characteristics as found in Yucatan do not necessarily repeat themselves in every folk society. The Guatemalan Indians, unsophisticated, homogeneous in beliefs and practices, are mobile, having relationships of the impersonal type, with formal institutions dictating the acts of individuals, with familial organization weak, and with life secularized.[2]

It was also pointed out that Max Weber has shown how capitalistic commercialism could, and did, go hand in hand with piety in the case of the Protestants and the Puritans. Under certain conditions of literate, and at least partly urbanized, society, a culture may be both highly commercial and sacred as in the case of the Jewish history.[3]

In the light of these findings, Silwa community fits rather with Redfield's characteristics of the folk society. Silwa is a comparatively isolated community, as it lies at a distance of about thirty miles from both Edfu and Kom Ombo, the nearest urban centres to the north and south respectively, while more than seven hundred miles separates it from Cairo. On the other hand, it is less isolated than other village communities in the sense that there is a Post Office, a Railway Station (at which express trains do not stop), as well as a Police Station. It is also less isolated in that it has a weekly market, to which people from surrounding villages and traders from nearby towns come to buy and sell their goods.

The villagers are, on the whole, relatively immobile, a phenomenon that makes face to face relationships loom large in the folk society. The attachment to their locality is also associated with a sectional pride in their origin, which embraces the various villages of G'afra, and explains to them the differences between their customs and traditions and those of other regions. The villagers refer to themselves as well as to other Moslems by the term 'nation of Moslems' (ummat-al-muslimeen), and feel that they are Arabs first and foremost. One occasionally sees pictures of Imam Ali and his sons, Hassan and Hussein, Abu-zeid-al-Hilali, decorating some houses, especially of newly married couples. For the villagers, the world is

[1] Robert Redfield, *The Folk Culture of Yucatan*, pp. 360, 362.
[2] Sol Tax, 'World View and Social Relations in Guatemala', in *American Anthropologist*, Vol. XLIII, 1941, pp. 27–42.
[3] Robert Redfield, 'The Folk Society', in *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. LII, 1947, p. 308.

2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
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Upper Egypt

peacemaker arrives in time a serious disturbance can usually be avoided.

The accounts given in subsequent chapters of blood-feuds, inter-village fights, and other crimes of violence should not, however, cause the reader to pass too harsh a judgment on the Egyptian peasants if he will but bear in mind that the violent contrasts in the physical features of the country are reflected in the psychology of the inhabitants collectively and individually.

The *fellāḥīn* form the bulk of the population of Egypt, and the

FIG. 4. A VILLAGE ON THE BANKS OF THE BAḤR EL-YŪSUF

larger number of them are Muslims. The Copts, who at one time were far more numerous than they are at the present day, are scattered about all over the country, though in a few towns and villages they may form the greater part of the population. The word 'Copt,' it must be borne in mind, does not denote a racial, but rather a religious, distinction.

The Beduins (Arabic *Bedu*, singular *Bedawī*), many of whom still lead a more or less nomadic desert life, and the Arabs, who have settled down as cultivators of the soil, also form a not inconsiderable portion of the population. Their facial features and certain styles of dress distinguish them from the native inhabitants. Nubians, Sudan negroes, Turks, Greeks, Syrians, and Jews are also to be found in large numbers, the four latter peoples chiefly in Lower Egypt, though they do not altogether confine themselves

2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Upper Egypt

CHAPTER X

AGRICULTURE AND HARVEST RITES

THE wealth and prosperity of Egypt is, and always has been, dependent upon the produce of the soil, and the peasants are before everything else agriculturalists, as is also indicated by the Egyptian Arabic word for peasant—*fellāḥ* (plural *fellāḥīn*), meaning one who digs or tills. The peasants, most of whom are quite illiterate, are remarkably clever agriculturalists, and every young boy is well versed in all that pertains to the cultivation of the soil. Their methods are, for the most part, very primitive, though, of course, the present system of storing water and of distributing it over various districts has been adopted comparatively recently, and to maintain it a number of highly trained engineers are required. This book is not concerned with these modern developments, which, indeed, lie beyond the scope of anthropology, but with the ordinary work in the fields, where ancient methods and ancient implements are still largely employed, and ancient customs are still observed.

The cultivated lands in Egypt lie along either bank of the river, without any apparent boundaries, for there are no hedges to divide the fields as in England. To the eye of the ordinary traveller there is nothing to indicate where one man's property ends and another's begins. The fields are broken up into small squares, separated from each other by ridges of earth and narrow trenches. When water is distributed over a given area it is conducted through the trenches into the square plots by making an opening through the ridges which surround them. When the plots have received their due allowance of water the openings are built up again and the stream is directed to another portion of the land.

The greater number of the peasants own or hire small plots which are marked off one from the other by boundary stones stuck into the ground at intervals of six feet or more. Many a village quarrel has arisen over these stones, the removal of a neighbour's landmark being a constant cause of disturbance. If a man, for

3: Ayrout M-5 (ca. 1935) 1945
MR13 Fellahin MR13

FOREWORD

The "Fellaheen" of Egypt are the oldest peasantry in the world. History teaches us this, and also that the Valley of the Nile shows the oldest records of civilised and cultural life.

Throughout thousands of years our peasantry has kept its customs, habits, character, and type in a remarkably steady manner.

It is still essentially what it was in the far-distant Pharaonic days : one of the two main pillars of Egypt's wealth and well-being. The other, as Herodotus remarked long ago, is the river Nile.

A great deal has been said about the Fellah, particularly during the last few decades, and there is a vast amount of literature about Egypt and its people. Seldom, however, has a writer devoted his main interest to the study of the Egyptian peasant as a human type, looking at him, his character, his culture and traditions, with sympathy, objectivity, and an unbiased view.

The present book fills this gap in the literature about our country. We owe its author our sincerest thanks.

The more one really studies the Fellaheen of Egypt, the more one will discard a lot of mistaken ideas about their character. Now that the country has come to a turning-point of its history, it is essential that its people as a whole should be fully aware of the tremendous task ahead of them. A complete and intimate collaboration among all classes, a particularly sympathetic understanding — and not just a platonic one — of their peasantry by the upper class and landowners, is the basis and most important element of this patriotic cooperation. The "Fellah", whether as a small — and how small! — landowner or as an agri-

3: Ayrout M-5 (ca. 1935) 1945
MR13 Fellahin MR13

CHAPTER I

CHANGELESSNESS

The fellaheen (¹), that is to say the country labourers of Egypt, whose life is the subject of the following chapters, represent something more than a mere class. As a uniform, autochthonous mass, which constitutes more than three quarters of the total population, they may rightly be called the people of Egypt.

This people, which produced the earliest civilisation, or at any rate a civilisation of great originality that has lasted for fifty centuries, shows exceptional powers of survival and persistence.

The fellaheen have changed their masters, their religion, their language and their crops, but not their manner of life. From the distant epochs of the Old Kingdom to the climax of the dynastic period the Egyptian people preserved and maintained itself. Under foreign domination, for years or centuries at a time, by Persians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Turks, French and English, it has remained unchangingly the same. Even today the fellaheen play practically no part in the Egyptian renaissance, or the movement for independence and progress.

They were at first pagans carrying totemism to the point of zoolatry, then for ten centuries Christians who reached the heights of asceticism and martyrdom. They made no difficulties about accepting Islam, and yet thirteen hundred years of Mohammedanism have done little to change their fundamental beliefs.

They are a receptive, yet resistant people; patient, but unyielding. Although they have dwelt so long at the crossroads of international traffic, in a country which has been the scene of earth-shaking events, they remain as calm and unmoved as the depths of the sea beneath a storm.

3: Ayrout M-5 (ca. 1935) 1945
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Egypt MR1

Chapter III

THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND

EGYPT AN OLIGARCHY

In Egyptian politics and society the peasantry has always constituted the primal mass, and as it were the raw material; the foundation, almost the sub-soil, on which government and society are based. This double structure must now be considered before we can look more closely at the fellah's way of life.

The façade of contemporary Egypt, modern and composite in style, is represented by the country's three great cities with their striking, many-sided activity. There is Cairo, with its two universities (having nearly 20,000 students), its palaces and museums, its scientific institutions, its international congresses and winter lecture-courses. There is Alexandria, with its busy port and Cotton Exchange, its foreign institutions, its fashionable beaches and esplanade. There is Port Said, gateway to the East, with the Suez Canal and all its traffic. These cities compose a sort of triptych, in which large and varied groups standing side by side conceal the fundamental Egypt, just as the stones of a mosaic hide the grey cement which supports them.

Just as it was once usual to speak of 'All the Russias', so today, from a social point of view, one might well talk of Egypt in the plural. There is no single Egyptian people, in the usual literary or historical sense of this word, but only a seething assemblage of the most varied types, which has no real correspondence with the country itself. Neither is there a true peasant community, but only a homogeneous mass of peasants bound to the soil and isolated in their villages.

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Chapter IV

THE FELLAH AT WORK

The preceding chapters have given a general picture of the physical and social environment of the Egyptian peasantry. Thus the problem has been stated and approached. We can now attack it directly, by considering the fellah himself, first of all at the work from which he derives his name. 121

The Arabic word *fellàh*, which has passed into most modern languages, is the intensive adjective of the verb *fàlaha*, which means to till the ground, labour or toil. 101

As the reader will have already observed, the fellah is looked upon primarily, if not exclusively, as a 'hand' or agricultural machine. As "economic man", he is equated with labour. 186 369

The work of the fellah, even more than his physical and mental make-up or his habitat, is determined by the double environment we have been considering. It seems in fact the mere consequence of the opportunities and limitations created by the soil and by society. His work will thus lead us to the consideration of the fellah as a human being, for it is he who in return carries on the work of the soil and adapts it to human needs. We have here a clear case of reciprocal interaction. 121 183

festivals,

1. Methods of Work

The dark soil is not only productive, but also exacting from one year's end to another. The fellah, who is not obliged by the Koran to take a weekly day of rest, works the whole year round, and takes a holiday only at the great festivals, that is to say about ten days in a twelvemonth. 134 461

The sun shines for at least eleven hours a day, and in May, June and July nearer fifteen. The fellah spends by far the greater part of his time in the fields, and for some kinds of work stays there all night. 132 461

3: Ayrout M-5 (ca. 1935) 1945
MR13 Fellahin MR13

NOTES

113 The notes are those of the Second French Edition of 1942 (Horus, Cairo), except where marked *T*. These are annotations by the translator.

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1. HISTOIRE DE LA NATION EGYPTIENNE, 7 vols, Paris 1931-6. published under the auspices of King Fuad I, and edited by G. Hanotaux.

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1(a) *T*.—The standard works in English are :
Cromer (Earl of) : MODERN EGYPT, 2 vols, London 1908.
Lloyd (Lord Lloyd of Dolobran) : EGYPT SINCE CROMER, London 1934.

2. FELLAH, masc. sing., originally one who tills or ploughs the soil ; masc. plural FELLAHEEN ; fem. sing. FELLAHA.

3. DÉSCRIPTION DE L'EGYPTE, Paris, 1821-9.
These volumes comprise a valuable collection of detailed observations and researches, made in Egypt during the Napoleonic Expedition.

4. Jean Brunhes : LA GÉOGRAPHIE HUMAINE : Paris, 1925.

P. Vidal de la Blache : PRINCIPES DE GÉOGRAPHIE HUMAINE : Paris, 1922.

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